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Brief Report

Young children contrast their behavior to that of out-group members



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ABSTRACT

The tendency for children to overimitate and conform to unanimous majorities is pervasive. Here we tested whether social factors are powerful enough to lead children to overcome this tendency and contrast their behavior to that of others. In one condition, children were shown a video of three out-group members performing the same action on a novel toy. In this condition, 5-year-olds, but not 4-year-olds, were significantly more likely to produce the contrasting action than the action demonstrated by the group. On the other hand, children who saw the same actions performed by neutral individuals typically matched their actions to those of the group regardless of their age. By demonstrating that 5-year-olds actively contrast their behavior to that of out-group members, these results provide an important comparison with previous research on imitation and conformity and demonstrate the profound influence that social motivations exert over children's copying behavior.

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Introduction

Children are prolific imitators. Their inclination to imitate is so powerful that they faithfully reproduce the actions of a demonstrator even when those actions have no apparent purpose or causal function. This phenomenon is known as “overimitation” (Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007). The tendency to overimitate is so strong that 3- to 5-year-old children copy the actions of a demonstrator even when they have been directly instructed not to do so, when they have been trained to identify irrelevant

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actions, and when doing so means that they risk losing a competition (Lyons, Damrosch, Lin, Macris, & Keil, 2011; Lyons et al., 2007). Perhaps just as powerful is the tendency to conform to unanimous majorities. Haun and Tomasello (2011) demonstrated that children sometimes conform to the opinions of a majority even when those opinions are clearly false.

However, children do not always copy so faithfully (Flynn & Whiten, 2008). The social environment is one important factor in modulating the actions that children reproduce (Nielsen, 2009; Over & Carpenter, 2013). For example, 4- and 5-year-olds imitate more faithfully when they have a goal to affiliate (Over & Carpenter, 2009) and when the model is watching their actions (Nielsen & Blank, 2011). Social factors have also been shown to influence how likely children are to copy certain models. For example, young children are more likely to reproduce the actions of in-group members than out-group members (Howard, Henderson, Carrazza, & Woodward, 2015). This has been interpreted as evidence that children ignore behavior modeled by out-group members because it is less relevant to them (Howard et al., 2015).

Here, we investigated whether there are times at which children do not ignore, but actively contrast, their behavior to that of out-group members. Previous research has demonstrated that adults sometimes seek to distance their behavior from that of the out-group (Ruys, Spears, Gordijn, & De Vries, 2007). For example, adults react faster in a lexical decision task when primed with an elderly out-group (Schubert & Hafner, 2003) and alter their preferences toward an object to make them dissimilar to those of an out-group (Izuma & Adolphs, 2013).

We know from previous research that group membership exerts a powerful influence over young children's behavior and cognition. For example, 5-year-olds prefer members of their own group to members of another group even when these groups are minimal (Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011). These preferences influence children's resource distribution such that children are more generous to in-group members (Buttelmann & Bohm, 2014). Further research has demonstrated that, in addition to preferring in-group members to out-group members, children show signs that they negatively evaluate out-group members. For example, 5-year-olds are more likely to attribute negative traits to the out-group compared to the in-group (Aboud, 2003). Moreover, after their sixth birthday, children give negative resources to out-group members rather than giving them to no one (Buttelmann & Bohm, 2014).

We were interested in whether children actively contrast their behavior to that of out-group members. We showed children two possible ways to operate a novel light box. We then presented children with a video in which three individuals demonstrated one of the ways to operate the light box. In the Out-group condition, the three individuals in the video had been allocated to a different group from the children. We compared children's performance in this condition to that in a Neutral condition where neither the children nor the three individuals in the video had been allocated to a group. We chose a Neutral condition rather than an in-group comparison condition because we wanted to ensure that any differences between the conditions were driven by children's responses to the out-group rather than by their preference for their own group. We predicted that children would imitate the actions of the three individuals in the video more often in the Neutral condition than in the Out-group condition.

Demonstrating that children distinguish between out-group members and neutral individuals is a first step toward showing contrast effects. However, assuming that we found this pattern of results, it would be compatible with two different explanations: (a) that children ignore members of their out-group and (b) that children actively contrast their behavior to that of out-groups. Thus, we had a further prediction about performance within the Out-group condition. We reasoned that if children *ignore* the behavior of the out-group, then they should produce the two possible actions equally often in this condition. If children *contrast* their behavior to that of the out-group, then they should reproduce the action demonstrated by the out-group significantly less often than the alternative action.

Our main interest was in whether 5-year-olds would show these effects. Previous research has shown that children at this age overimitate (Horner & Whiten, 2005; Lyons et al., 2007) and that they do so more than younger children (McGuigan, Whiten, Flynn, & Horner, 2007). Moreover, their imitation is influenced by social factors (Over & Carpenter, 2009). This age is also important in the development of group membership. Not only are 5-year-olds relatively more positive toward in-group members (Dunham et al., 2011; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007), they also show signs of negatively evaluating out-group members (Aboud, 2003).

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